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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/24/2027

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SUBJECT: U.S. COMMISSION ON INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
MEETS WITH SAUDI HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[11](#). (C) SUMMARY: Members and staff of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) met with representatives of Saudi Arabia's Human Rights Commission (HRC) and the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) during their May 27-June 5, 2007 visit to the Kingdom. HRC President Turki Al-Sudairy told the Commission that the Board reports directly to the King and develops policy on a range of issues. He noted that the HRC has resolved approximately 67 percent of the over 1,000 complaints it has received, and works closely with NSHR. HRC representatives reiterated support for the principle of freedom of religion, but emphasized that reform in this regard must be "managed" in order to balance competing priorities within Saudi society.

[12](#). CONTINUE SUMMARY: Dr. Mufleh Al-Khatani, who chaired the NSHR meeting with USCIRF, told the Commission that it has received 8,500 cases in the past three years. He underscored that NSHR addresses human rights from an Islamic perspective and ensures that actions do not contradict Shari'a. NSHR's recent projects included visiting 23 jails to document conditions and follow-up on specific cases, as well as issuing the first human rights report by Saudi civil society. He added that NSHR is working on a study comparing Saudi laws and international human rights treaties. NSHR told the Commission that while "officially" there are no religious minorities, they exist "socially." END SUMMARY.

HRC

[13](#). (C) USCIRF Members and staff met with representatives of Saudi Arabia's HRC on June 2, 2007. Discussions focused on religious freedom and human rights, as well as issues relating to women's rights. HRC representatives included Turki Al-Sudairy, President, Ibrahim Al-Muneef, Member, Abdul Aziz Henaidy, Director General of International Organizations and Relations, and Ali Al-Mustaneer, Director of Public Relations.

[14](#). (C) Al-Sudairy explained that the HRC was established in September 2005 but noted its Board was not appointed until December 2006. He stressed that the HRC reports directly to the King, and Al-Muneef explained that the Board does not focus on any particular segment of Saudi society. Al-Henaidy described how the Board develops policies, noting that it has five committees that meet weekly on topics such as other interpretations of Islam, women, marriage, and prisons.

[15](#). (C) Al-Sudairy continued that the HRC has a special

department that follows up on human rights-related complaints, noting that religious freedom is one of its priorities. According to Al-Sudairy, the HRC has received over 1,000 complaints and reviewed or resolved approximately 67 percent of them. He noted that the HRC works closely with NSHR and said they have a joint committee to coordinate activities.

¶16. (C) HRC representatives noted that they accept the right of individuals to adopt any religion, including other interpretations of Islam. However, they explained that the culture of human rights and religious freedom is new to Saudis, emphasizing that the King has frequently condemned religious bigotry, as well as conflicts between Islamic sects. They continued that the King established the Islamic Center so representatives of all sects could meet and discuss issues and problems relating to religion (NOTE: Post is unaware of the existence of such a center. We will follow up with HRC to try and obtain further information. END NOTE). Al-Henaidy stressed that no one wants chaos, but said some think the SAG has gone too far with regard to religion, while Al-Sudairy added that the SAG must be careful to "balance demands and issues."

¶17. (C) Al-Sudairy explained that Saudi Arabia has signed on to international human rights treaties and agreements with reservations regarding religion because of its unique role as guardian of Islam's two holy mosques. He explained that Saudi Arabia has "a special responsibility to the world's 1.3 billion Muslims."

¶18. (C) Turning to issues relating to women, Al-Sudairy predicted that they will be given more rights, emphasizing that there has been progress in this regard. He continued that the HRC has several projects underway to increase the public's awareness of human rights, issues, including the

use of print media, television, and radio, and is developing pamphlets to explain human rights.

NSHR

¶19. (C) The Commission also met with NSHR representatives in Riyadh on June 3, 2007. NSHR provided USCIRF with an overview of its structure and activities, noting that it was established in 2004 with 40 members, including 10 women. Members are appointed by the King, and the president, deputies and committee heads are elected by the members. NSHR's four committees include monitoring/follow-up, family, studies/consultations, and culture/publications.

¶110. (C) Thirty committee members monitor human rights abuses, and complaints are received in Riyadh and four regional branch offices. Law graduates give legal advice as needed, and NSHR members write to public authorities on behalf of complainants, citing relevant treaties and laws. Meeting participants agreed that the response from some agencies has been very good.

¶111. (C) According to NSHR, it received 8,500 cases in the last three years, including administrative, judicial, prisoner, and labor issues. Additionally, it receives cases from Saudis and non-Saudis, as well as from Saudis living abroad (NOTE: NSHR recently contacted the U.S. Consulate in Dhahran regarding an American woman who lost custody of her children in the Saudi courts and who has alleged other violations of her rights. NSHR is determining whether to take an advocacy role on her behalf. END NOTE). NSHR issues a free monthly bulletin entitled "Rights," and developed a press file for media reports on human rights issues. NSHR also prints Arabic copies of international human rights agreements and offers seminars and lectures.

¶112. (C) NSHR representatives noted that recent projects included visits to 23 jails to document conditions and follow

up on cases. They added that they recently issued the first human rights report by Saudi civil society (septel) and are working on a study comparing Saudi laws and international human rights treaties.

¶13. (C) Shi,a activist Dr. Mufleh Al-Khatani, who chaired the meeting with USCIRF, underscored that NSHR addresses human rights from an Islamic perspective and ensures that actions do not contradict Shari,a. There are many debates within Saudi society on Islamic texts and religious police, he said, and some view the religious police as a means to protect human rights. However, he also pointed out that others see them as an impediment to human rights. Al-Khatani stated that the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has its own regulations, noting that the public is now asking that these regulations be specified clearly. He said the religious police are not trained on the Convention Against Torture, adding that it is difficult for NSHR to criticize them because it does not have "real Government status."

¶14. (C) Al-Khatani acknowledged that the Kingdom has a long way to go with human rights, saying Saudi society is not yet used to this concept. He added that SAG ministries and agencies were previously unresponsive to NSHR requests. However, after the SAG issued a statement that all government bodies must respond promptly to NSHR requests, most have been responding within three weeks.

¶15. (C) NSHR representatives told the Commission that "officially" there are no religious minorities, but "socially" they do exist. NSHR indicated that it has two Shi,a members, including the Eastern Province Branch President. One member described how Eastern Province teachers had been transferred to posts below their education level, saying that, after NSHR intervention, the Government reversed the move.
GFOELLER